

Liminal States and Provisional Citizens

Brad Congdon
Dalhousie University

ARE GRADUATE STUDENTS academic citizens?" This is the second question I asked myself after being invited to join the Committee for Professional Concerns panel on academic citizenship at ACCUTE. I am still not sure I have an answer. The first question, however, was "What *is* academic citizenship?" So my research began, right after I accepted the invitation.

Unfortunately, the concept of "academic citizenship" isn't well-defined. Often, it's used as a synonym for service, and if it's only that, then its importance to me, as a graduate student, is as another aspect of professionalization. But this seems like a fairly limited interpretation. The idea of "citizenship" implies much more, invoking ideas of the university as communal and democratic rather than bureaucratic or corporate. So I read further about service communities, academic activism, and the importance of disciplinary socialization. However, all this did was deepen my concern that academic citizenship might not apply to me and that I might have little to contribute to the panel.

And then, frankly, I got a little anxious. I'd never been to ACCUTE and already had another paper to write. Like most students, I had a list of various commitments and deadlines to meet, academic and otherwise (and topping this list were two approaching summer classes, as well as

BRAD CONGDON is a doctoral candidate in English at Dalhousie University. He has published critical work on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and his SSHRC-funded dissertation examines the competing constructions of masculinity in various literary texts as they were originally published in American men's interest magazines.

the need to find further employment in order to pay for rent, food, and school, where I still had a dissertation to write). Really, I wanted to care about academic citizenship, but it struck me as a concern that may place me, despite my best efforts, at a remove. And that's troubling. So I asked other graduate students for their thoughts on academic citizenship. Like me, none of them had a clear idea of what it meant. When I offered my limited understanding, most agreed that it was an important issue. Some even said that they'd get back to me with their thoughts. They didn't.

If students are reticent to speak on the topic, and if I remain uncertain even after my research, then perhaps it's because there's no satisfactory answer to the primary question: "Is a graduate student an academic citizen?" The only answer I've come up with is "kinda." Basically, a graduate student is a provisional citizen, one whose status isn't guaranteed.

The ambivalence around graduate students' status as academic citizens isn't only felt by students but is reflected in the scholarship. For example, in his book *The Academic Citizen*, Bruce Macfarlane identifies the five communities served by academics as "*students, colleagues, their institution, their discipline or profession, and the public*" (70). These communities are envisioned as a "service pyramid," with student service forming the base of the pyramid and the public its peak, since "institutional reward and recognition and the ingrained practice of academic life places a higher premium on service contributions to other communities" (72). Macfarlane's study shows that academics hold student service in the least esteem. Moreover, opportunities for service are limited in some of these communities, while graduate students themselves are actually *part* of the pyramid. The bottom part. Samuel Long also points to the academy's ambivalence toward graduate students, identifying them as "quasi-citizen[s] within the university political system" (221). What's not clear from the literature, then, is the extent to which citizenship applies to graduate students; we seem to exist in a liminal space between citizens and the communities they serve.

The deeper considerations about academic citizenship are many: for example, how can we view service not just as professionalization but as a contribution to a community? How do we quantify the difference between a "good" and a "bad" academic citizen? How might we engender a classroom which reflects the concerns of social justice? All important questions, but it's difficult to consider their implications when your continued status as an academic citizen is uncertain, and unless your citizenship is confirmed they remain more or less theoretical. Perhaps the real question is "Are the concerns of citizenship relevant to graduate students?"

The anxiety that most graduate students feel about their job prospects, and the uncertainty about their future in academia, doesn't help to nurture academic citizens, either. In some ways, graduate students have been conditioned to think of themselves not as citizens but as mercenaries. This is why, for instance, a student might jump at the opportunity to give a paper on academic citizenship without first having researched it thoroughly. We're inexpensive mercenaries, all things considered, since we're paid with lines on our CV. I've actually heard a graduate student CV referred to as a passport into academia, and, if that's the case, remember that entrance isn't assured. So for graduate students, the many concerns of citizenship are effectively reduced to one: *how* to get in.

When I'm feeling cynical about academia, I wonder if maybe the metaphor itself needs to be challenged. The idea of the academic-as-citizen promises much, but it also obscures the unequal distribution of power and the role of money in the university. If, in most cases, citizenship is something that is granted, then it is granted by registrars and hiring committees. If undergraduate students are citizens, with rights and privileges, then perhaps it is because they have paid for them; instructors may have different rights and privileges, but they are also employees. Not surprisingly, graduate students usually pay tuition while often being paid to complete their degree. This, however, does not mean that they end up with twice as many rights. As a teaching assistant, my responsibilities largely come from the fact that I am a paid employee, and my rights come from the terms of my contract. When thinking along these lines, it seems to me that calling yourself a citizen is simply a way to ennoble your position in a corporate hierarchy.

But I've learned to be more optimistic than that. Perhaps liminal citizenship affords graduate students some freedom. At this level, no particular individual or group is responsible for conferring citizenship; being accepted into a graduate program only affords opportunity, while comprehensive examinations qualify students as specialists and dissertations result in degrees. Citizenship, as a more-or-less abstract idea, can only be taken on by students themselves. It becomes a performative act, in that, if I want to, I can perform an act of citizenship, and hence become a citizen for a moment, and then return to my role as a student. And maybe, if the job outlook is so bad, and my professional future isn't guaranteed, then it might be far healthier to stop thinking of graduate school as a type of job training and instead to begin thinking of it as an opportunity to be a fellow citizen, if only provisionally. More importantly, it's time to consider how my degree benefits me as a citizen of other communities and how I

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can benefit those communities; as Kel Morin-Parsons argued in her 2009 Reader's Forum contribution, graduate degrees give people the tools "to be better citizens and to make the world better, safer, more peaceful, more long-sighted, more prosperous, more exciting" (9), and so it profits the nation to have such educated people in it.

This summer, I helped organize a conference at my university. I hope to help plan another, to apply to some more as well, and to be there with advice for new graduate students; in short, I'll engage in and practise those aspects of citizenship available to me. I don't know if it will help me get a job, but I do know that it will make me a part of a community and not just another trainee.

Works Cited

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